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Stanislavsky revisited: the Meiningens

In *My Life in Art*, Stanislavsky wrote that the Meiningens created a new and very important period in his theatrical development.^[2] He thanked the Meiningens for giving him the directorial lessons, such as the historically accurate atmosphere, the scenes with the crowd, and the severe discipline that Chronegk imposed on the company. After thanking them, Stanislavsky as if closed the page, removing any sense of *continuity* of their influence upon his life and creativity. Meiningen-ism was a period, with clearly marked borders. Partially, as it follows from Stanislavsky, the reason was that they did not have good actors, and thus they could not leave a long and meaningful trace in the Russian cultural memory.

As Yuri Lotman wrote, the historian reconstructs the sender's code in order to explain the sender's attitude towards the facts being communicated and to re-establish the spectrum of possible interpretations.^[3] This approach allows us to revisit the most "textbok" case of Stanislavsky's evaluation of the Meiningens' influence upon his life and art. Stanislavsky's chapter about the Meiningens is filled with contradictions and inconsistencies. In this paper, I would like to investigate two aspects of the "meiningenism": to re-evaluate Stanislavsky's records of the Meiningens, whose performances he attended in 1890, and to examine what exactly the Duke's directing taught Stanislavsky, the director, besides the common knowledge about the historical atmosphere, the crowd scenes, and artistic discipline. One of the best historians of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, Nikolai Efros, wrote that the Duke in fact taught Stanislavsky *the language* of how to express his theatrical fantasies. While the first aspect requires comparative analysis of the available historical and critical literature, the second one should be based on the studies of the specific directorial means that the Duke had taught Stanislavsky, which the latter creatively expanded.

Stanislavsky, 27 at the time, attended the second tour of the Meiningens in 1890; there is no evidence of his seeing the first tour of the company. Before the Meiningens came, he re-read Shakespeare's plays. He recorded the shows in his notebook, and also did his sketches of the scenes, creating a detailed ground plan. Unknowingly, he was reversing the Duke's directorial process: Georg II., an artist and an architect, drew every single scene of the play, and later he, his wife, and Chronegk rehearsed the play in accordance with the drawings. Stanislavsky not only drew and sketched the scenes from the performances, but also described in detail everything that he was particularly interested in experimenting with himself: the Meiningens' *mise-en-scenes*, the compositions of the crowd scenes, the battles, and the use of light and sound effects. Stanislavsky was dazzled by the complete illusion of life that the Meiningens had masterfully created on stage: it was stitch—less, flawless. In every scene he fancied, Stanislavsky tried to guess what made the illusion work. "The army is marching silently in complete darkness. From time to time, we see the glimpses of their armor, and hear the noises coming from their shields... The darkness completes the illusion."^[4] The chapter about the Meiningens has very controversial references to actors: he starts the chapter contesting the opinions of those who denied the presence of good actors, and ended the chapter agreeing with them. However, Stanislavsky did not write about the actors and their skills not only because he was not impressed by them; for the first time in his life the productions were more captivating than any individual actor or the ensemble of actors, and while watching them, he concentrated on the technique of how they had been made. I believe that the understanding of the new wholeness of the show created by the director—above and beyond the actors—was Stanislavsky's greatest discovery, which promised fantastic artistic achievements on the one hand and new dangers on the other hand (for the actors, who had been the center of Stanislavsky's theatrical universe).

Before the second tour of the Meiningens, for Stanislavsky theatre was the kingdom of the actor. He used frontal *mise-en-scenes*, accompanied the climactic scenes with sound effects; he dressed them in beautiful costumes, and professional designers painted/built the scenery. The music and vocal abilities of the amateur artists were close to those of the professionals. The flow of the show was viewed as a chain of *tableau vivants*; actors were trained months to play their parts, as the director(s) saw fit. Although the Society productions were very well put together for the amateurs, the characters were not real people and the world surrounding them was still just a part of the background. Unlike in his own productions, the Duke's shows created the atmosphere of reality, and the background became the independent world, which was living its own life. Every single element in the Duke's productions was placed in constant polyphonic co-relation with every other element. Having described for himself the shows, Stanislavsky was learning the new polyphonic arrangements, for whose creation he would be fully credited later, and which would develop into the polyphonic arrangements of Chekhov's plays on the MHAT stage. Indeed, especially in the later years, Stanislavsky asked himself why the individual actors were not noticed. In the chapter, he gives various answers. So-so actors? But what about Barnay? Good actors, but not good enough? Then why did the directors not help them to become even better actors and to shine on stage? What is the role of a director if not to help actors? Stanislavsky asked himself all these questions.

The next and potentially dangerous discovery for Stanislavsky was this: the Meiningen actors (their voices, bodies, movements, etc.) were used just as the other theatrical elements, and the productions created mesmerizing impressions above, beyond, and outside the actors. The actors were part of the polyphonic score of the production. The fact that all parts of the production existed in constant interaction was a brand new quality of theatre for Stanislavsky, and there he learned the potential. Nikolai Efros wrote, the meiningenism is a complex trend, and is consisting of many components. Some of these components were absorbed faster and easier, because of their obvious, beneficiary for any theatre potential use. Others were seeded deeper, and it was not as easy to locate and evaluate them. With Stanislavsky, his infatuation with the meiningenism went through these stages accordingly. [5] In Stanislavsky's process of becoming a theatre director, Efros recognized the first stage as his infatuation with the life-like atmosphere of the productions, with its almost archeological creation of costumes and props, the individualized crowd, and the truthful atmosphere of the place and time. Infected by the ideas of the Duke, Stanislavsky announced himself as a director in a new meaning of the word the following year, in February 1891, with his first production of *The Fruits of Enlightenment*. There, he tried to explore social characterization of the three groups of characters, making them exotic and authentic from the view points of each other. The next step of his meiningenism was taken in Guzkow's *Uriel Acosta*, and was enthusiastically described by many theatre critics of the time. Stanislavsky in his book called it a la Meiningens production, which won them, as he wrote, the patent on the best crowd scenes on the Russian stage. The critics, although they complimented the actors (and especially the beautiful Judith played by Andreyeva), found that the individualized crowd of the Amsterdam Jews and the atmosphere of medieval Amsterdam were the best aspects of the production. The complicated interactions between the characters and the crowd required a detailed directorial plan: from that point, Stanislavsky started writing them. His directorial plan of *Othello* would become a colossal novel, and a new genre in theatre literature.

I would agree with Nikolai Efros, who defined the next stage of the Meiningens' influence upon Stanislavsky, as the purely directorial exploration of the possibilities of the stage. Stanislavsky moved from what Efros called the elementary meiningenism (realistic directing) to the fantastic, poetic, and philosophical aspects of directing. [6] For the first time, Stanislavsky viewed the potentials of directing as the possibility of self-expression of his wildest fantasies (which, I believe, was Stanislavsky's first exploration of symbolism and modernism in directing). In this respect, that was Georg II. who infected Stanislavsky with the idea of experimenting with theatre forms on stage: during the Meiningen tour, Stanislavsky wrote about the Meiningens' use of lights and sounds, which he himself used for the first time in just a few years after the Meiningen tour. He wrote in his Meiningen notebooks: "During the battle, the greatest illusion is created through the distant sound of the horns. Only two-three people are on stage..." [7] From *The Merchant of Venice*, Stanislavsky learned how to create the illusion of the ships moving on stage: the gondolas were placed on rails, creating the image of smooth sailing (a similar device was used by Stanislavsky later in *Othello*.) Stanislavsky was preoccupied with the studies of the creation of *the space through sound* in *Fiesco* (*Die Verschwörung des Fiesco zu Genua*) by F. Schiller. Somewhere behind the stage (very far away, as he wrote in his notebook) there was the sound of a gate being raised, the clanging of heavy chains, voices approaching through endless corridors... [8] The potential use of sounds, which could create a flow of emotional information and pull all kinds of spectators' remote associations Stanislavsky also learned from the Meiningens. In *The Maid of Orleans*, Stanislavsky studied the role of details on stage: dead hands were sticking out of the ruins, creating the full image of the devastation after the battle.

During this last, "graduating" period of studying under the guidance of the Meiningens, Stanislavsky created two of his most original pre-Moscow Art Theatre productions. In them, Stanislavsky fully explored the possibilities of directorial influence upon the spectators, above and beyond the actors. These two shows (*The Assumption of Hannele* and *The Sunken Bell*) were the ones where Stanislavsky fully experimented with all the Meiningens' ideas. He attacked the audience with non-actor means of theatricality: visual, audio, and movement. Additionally, he tried the new architecture of the stage, which was also introduced by the Duke in *The Assumption of Hannele*, which he directed in the Solodovnikov Theatre in 1896: "spectators noticed an even darker shadow in the darkness... Then from the shadow, enormous wings started to grow... They covered the entire stage, all the way up to the ceiling, and then they slowly covered the dying girl... [9] The spectators sobbed, fainted, and screamed. In 1898, nine months prior to the opening of the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavsky reached the peak of his directorial post-Meiningen experiments. He changed the stage for *The Sunken Bell*. He wrote: I prepared such a stage floor for the actors upon which they cannot walk... The floor will make them adjust to the unusual mise-en-scenes... and play in a new way, which would not be determined by tradition. [10] Efros wrote that a poet merged with an inventor in Stanislavsky in these productions.

I believe that Stanislavsky faced the potential conflicts between acting and directing of acting and directing for the first time during his first directorial successes. According to Efros, Nemirovich-Danchenko, who attended *The Fruits of Enlightenment*, approved of his Zvezdintsev, but thought that his directorial experiments could potentially be somewhat dangerous by distorting the text. The critics of *Uriel Acosta* were fascinated by the crowd, but were not convinced by Stanislavsky's own interpretation of Acosta. His full directorial power over the audiences revealed itself in *The Assumption of Hannele* and *The Sunken Bell*, but Stanislavsky would not return to these discoveries until the Moscow Art Theatre return from its first tour abroad.

Perhaps Stanislavsky would have had less conflicting memories about the Meiningens if not for Feodor Kommissarzhevsky and his book: *Tvorchestvo Aktera i Teoriya Stanislavskogo* (*The Art of an Actor and the Stanislavsky theory*), which he published in 1917. Stanislavsky was furious with the book, and called Kommissarzhevsky many times a liar in his diary. Stanislavsky disagreed with the latter's words that the naturalistic acting of the Stanislavsky actors was the result of Stanislavsky's infatuation with the productions of the Meiningens. Stanislavsky wrote in his comments accompanying his words with the exclamation signs: "The Meiningens had banal, mediocre actors. All I took from the Meiningens was the floor plan (the ground plan of the stage)." [11] Kommissarzhevsky thus gave Stanislavsky another reason to diminish the Meiningens' role in his life. There was yet another factor. It is important to remember that Stanislavsky wrote *My Life in Art* in the early twenties, having already witnessed the outstanding directorial experiments of Vakhtangov and Meyerhold. He was witnessing the process in which the directing started overpowering and diminishing the importance of the actor. Thus, it seems that Stanislavsky, while writing *My Life in Art* adjusted his own memories to his agendas of the day.

Had Stanislavsky known that his chapter about the Meiningens would be quoted in many research articles and textbooks as one of the main references to the Duke's productions, he might have reconsidered some of his writing. The chapter itself is filled with contradictions and inconsistencies, recording Stanislavsky's inner battles, and echoing the theatrical political battles of the time. One of the flaws of the chapter from a theatre historian's point of view is that Stanislavsky confused the duties and occupations of Duke Georg II and Ludwig Chronegk: the matter was not clear to Stanislavsky, nor to most of his contemporaries. Chronegk was an experienced actor, and was responsible for working with the company and taking the company on tours, observing the thorough execution of the Duke's directorial plans. He was the irreplaceable company manager, too, and was sending daily reports to Georg II., but he was not the one who had made the artistic decisions. In his chapter, Stanislavsky demoted the Duke to the status of patron, while making Chronegk the artistic director of the company and the one who was inspiring in the actors "bewildered fear and respect," which was a common mistake, according to Koller. [12] Stanislavsky also wrote that he became a director-dictator just like Chronegk, and then "very soon the majority of Russian stage directors began to imitate me in my despotism as I imitated Chronegk. There was a whole generation of despotic stage directors, who, alas, did not have the talents of Chronegk or of the Duke of Meiningen. These directors of the new type became mere producers, who made of the actor a stage property on the same level with stage furniture, a pawn that was moved about in its mise-en-scenes." [13] Stanislavsky had the passion for perfection and demonstrated the merciless hours of work long before the Meiningens and Chronegk. In this particular situation he used Chronegk in the same manner as governesses use stories of their former charges to inspire good behavior in their current wards. It looks like for Stanislavsky Chronegk's rehearsing approach was mixed with the director's profession in general,

together with the personal offenses and his personal bitterness about those directors who did not understand that theatre had always been about acting.

Stanislavsky continued his campaign against the directors. "The director can do many things, but not everything. The most important means are in the actors' hands, and actors need to be helped, they need to be guided... About this help for their actors, the Meiningen directors did not care much... The directorial plan was always ...deep..., but how to realize it without actors?"^[14] The next paragraph contains yet another twist: Stanislavsky suddenly compares his amateur group with the Meiningens: "We wanted to create great shows as well... but since we did not have good actors... we needed ... the director, who had done everything for us, with the help of ... scenery, props, mise-en-scenes and directorial fantasy." ^[15] In this paragraph, we have three layers of interpretation from different times of Stanislavsky's life and experience, distorting the picture of the Meiningens, Stanislavsky's process of becoming a theatre director, and the Society of Art and Literature. First of all, the directors who staged productions at the Society did not have powerful directorial fantasy, but rather years of theatrical experience, and, like Fedotov, used mostly frontal staging of the scenes. They certainly did not have the elaborate mise-en-scenes before Stanislavsky started to direct in 1891. Furthermore, it would be Stanislavsky himself, who, having learned from the Meiningens, would redirect the audience's attention from the actors to the atmosphere of the show. He learned it from the Meiningens, which later evolved into the MAT well-known "moods," which were created with the help of non-acting theatrical directorial devices. As Nikolai Efros wrote, "Stanislavsky's vivid imagination found *the methods* for translating it into the language of theatrical realities." ^[16] These methods were not known to Stanislavsky before the Meiningens; these methods would form his directorial principles in general, and would influence the directing of the future Russian theatre.

Stanislavsky, having experienced purely directorial power over the spectators, rejected it in favor of the actors. The theatrical means carried too much power, which extended itself beyond real art. In the 20s, Stanislavsky himself, whose avant-garde experiments were in the past, was turning towards traditional directing (recall *The Inspector General*). Stanislavsky's own partiality was very much in the style of the upcoming Stalinist obsession with the true Russian origins of cultural achievements. As Konstantin Rudnitsky wrote, "the Soviet theatre critics and historians attitude towards the Meiningens changed drastically only in the 30s and 40s (of the 20th century), when the history of the Moscow Art Theatre was forcefully straightened out and edited in the laudatory style. Even such serious scholars as Markov, Stroyeva, Solovyeva, and Polyakova assured us that as soon as Stanislavsky had been introduced to the Duke's art, he immediately surpassed him."^[17] The diminishing of Meiningens' overall influence upon Stanislavsky was very masterfully done: all the Stanislavsky scholars mentioned above were quoted numerous times in various Russian and international sources.

In conclusion: It seems to me vitally important to re-evaluate the Meiningens influence upon Stanislavsky and the further development of Russian directing in general. Under the Meiningens' influence, Stanislavsky explored stage tropes and learned how to overcome the stage limitations with the help of sound and light effects; how to re- and de-construct the stage, how to trigger remote associations in the audience; how to use actors as one of the tools in creating the overall powerful poetic images of the play. In the elaboration of the stage effects, the Duke foreshadowed the era of radio and film, as well as the computerized effects of our time. The line of cultural inheritance: from the Meiningens to Stanislavsky-- to Meyerhold and Vakhtangov -- becomes more obvious and inspires our further studies.

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[2]Stanislavski, Constantin *My Life in Art*. Theatre Arts Books, New York 1948, p. 200.

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[6]Ibid. p. 72.

[7]Vinogradskaya, Irina (footnote 3.), p. 123.

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